

*Resilience in the Face of an Epidemic: W. S. Maugham's the Painted Veil and Its Film Adaptations*

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**Abstract**

William Somerset Maugham's classical novel *The Painted Veil* (1924) and its three Hollywood adaptations (1934, 1957, 2006) explore a marital crisis set against a cholera epidemic in China in the 1920s. The source text and the film adaptations approach the epidemic from different perspectives, exploring its dramatic potential, metaphorical aspects and an overall impact on the population. They also offer a possibility for a (post)colonial (re)evaluation of the role of Western imperialist powers in disease management. Based on the material provided by the analysed literary and cinematic works, resilience in the face of an epidemic is considered from three perspectives. Firstly, the particularities of individual and group resilience are contrasted, and it is demonstrated that the disease and resistance to it are handled differently at a personal level and at the level of specific social and ethnic groups. Secondly, resilience is seen as built up and maintained in diverging ways when regarded from a scientific perspective as opposed to religious or spiritual approaches. Finally, resilience reveals itself differently in the context of the local versus Occidental response to the epidemic, bringing forward the East-West dichotomy. These tensions and contradictions are proved to be dependent to a significant degree on the evolving beliefs and attitudes, predominant ideological trends, and particular historical and political contexts of the novel or film production.

Keywords: William Somerset Maugham, Film Adaptation, Resilience

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a surge of interest in the literary and cinematic works centered on contention of and resistance to epidemics. In this context a fresh regard can be cast on William Somerset Maugham's classical novel *The Painted Veil*, describing a cholera epidemic in China in the 1920s, and its film adaptations.

Adaptation is often seen as a form of intertextuality; it can be considered as a rewriting of a pre-existing text, a "palimpsestuous" work, a text in the "second" degree (Genette, 1982, p. 5). Regarding an adaptation as a palimpsest is supported by Linda Hutcheon, who connects the formal and hermeneutic identity of adaptations with their relation to recognizable other works (2006, p. 21). In Dennis Cutchins' opinion, intertextuality can be argued to play a great role in adaptations as some of the meaning made and pleasure derived from an adaptation is due to the recognition of the interplay between texts (2014, p. 44). Adaptation in general can be regarded as an act of resilience. Robert Stam suggests regarding film adaptations as mutations helping their source to survive (2005, p. 3). Within the framework of the present discussion, it is important to recognize that some stories "have great fitness through survival (persistence in a culture) or reproduction (number of adaptations)" and that adaptation(s) can keep a particular story in the collective memory, as the story "adapts to its new environment and [...] lives on, through its 'offspring' - the same and yet not" (Hutcheon, 2006, pp. 32, 167).

Being "a barometer of the ideological trends circulating during the moment of production" (Stam, 2005, p. 45), adaptations depend to a considerable degree on the social, political, cultural, economic, aesthetic contexts in which they are created and received. Hutcheon argues that adaptations demonstrate "how stories evolve and mutate to fit new times and different places" (2006, p. 176). It can be claimed that remakes in particular demonstrate resilience of the source text. As L. Braudy (as cited in Hutcheon, 2006, p. 116) notes, film remakes prove a continuing historical, economic, cultural and psychological relevance of a particular narrative. This can be considered in the context of the present research; the film adaptations of *The Painted Veil* show the pertinence and longevity of the story as well as its resilience to the passage of time and the changing contexts.

Somerset Maugham (1874 – 1965), a classic of British literature, for half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was one of the most well-known authors in the world, enjoying an immense popularity in numerous countries, from the United States to Japan. Having established a high reputation in the stage play, short story, novel and screenwriting, at a certain moment he was the highest paid author in the world (Brophy, 1969, p. 106). The five years he spent as a medical student at St Thomas' Hospital in London and his brief medical practice gave him a sufficient background to write convincingly about disease-related topics. Although he chose a writing career, medical themes are recurrent in his works, with *The Painted Veil* being an important example thereof (Cross, 2007).

*The Painted Veil*, published in 1925, was inspired by an episode in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which was transformed by Maugham into a contemporaneous story of a British doctor Walter Fane bringing his adulterous wife Kitty to a cholera-stricken Chinese town Mei-tan-fu as a punishment, exercise of power and a possible attempt of murder. The book has served as the basis for three Hollywood adaptations (*The Painted Veil* [1934], dir. by Richard Boleslawski, *The Seventh Sin* [1957], dir. by Ronald Neame and Vincente Minnelli [uncredited], and *The Painted Veil* [2006], dir. by John Curran) that took a variable amount of liberties with the

source text and approached the topic of fighting a cholera epidemic from different perspectives dependent on the current attitudes in society to such subjects as East-West relationship, colonialism and the role of imperialist powers in managing epidemics. Close reading of both the novel and the film adaptations reveals that the resilience to the epidemic is depicted in them from different angles: firstly, through the contrast between individual and group resilience; secondly, through the prism of the scientific versus the religious perspective; thirdly, through the difference between the Oriental and the Occidental response to the epidemic.

At this point, it would be useful to specify what will be considered under the term of resilience in the present paper. Defined as “the ability of people or things to recover quickly after something unpleasant, such as shock, injury, etc.” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.) or as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.), resilience in the present discussion is regarded as an ability both to recover from the consequences and to resist the impact of the epidemic.

### **Individual and Group Resilience**

The starting point of the discussion will be the particularities of individual and group resilience as depicted in *The Painted Veil* and its screen adaptations. Personal resilience in face of an epidemic transpires through the examples of the protagonists and several secondary characters. Continuation of familiar practices appears to be a valid way to demonstrate resilience: the protagonists’ Chinese cook perseveres in serving a variety of dishes for dinner even though it is not needed, and the ingredients are difficult to obtain (Maugham, 2001, p. 155), whereas the French nuns in the convent in Mei-tan-fu exhibit “coolness in the face of danger and a practical sense” in carrying on their work methodically (Maugham, 2001, p. 105). They believe in the beneficial effect of continuing the routines in order to maintain calm; thus, the orphans under their charge still work on embroidery “notwithstanding the epidemic, because it takes [the girls’] minds off the danger” (Maugham, 2001, p. 100). In *The Painted Veil* (2006), this idea is reflected through the comment on keeping the older girls busy and occupied (Curran, 2006, 00:59:44-50). The upkeep of the routine and rituals in the convent also manifests itself through the ongoing Eucharist, which is referred to as “a great comfort [...] during this time of so terrible trouble” (Maugham, 2001, p. 103). All these examples demonstrate the importance attached to continuity that is maintained despite the dramatic disruption of everyday life by the disease.

Personal resistance is mentioned in the novel with reference to one of the protagonists: as Walter Fane has been overworking, he is believed to have no power to resist the illness (Maugham, 2001, p. 160). It can also be argued that both physical and moral resilience on a personal level are central to the other protagonist of *The Painted Veil* Kitty Fane and, interestingly, Pia de Tolomei, a character from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. In the introduction to his novel, Maugham explains that he drew inspiration from his Italian teacher’s comment on an episode in *Purgatorio*, in which Pia’s husband, suspecting her of adultery and afraid on account of her family to put her to death, took her down to his castle [...] the noxious vapours of which he was confident would do the trick; but she took so long to die that he grew impatient and had her thrown out of the window. (Maugham, 2001, p. ix)

The resilience demonstrated by Pia is reflected in Kitty Fane who defies cholera – and her husband – by ostentatiously eating uncooked vegetables, thus “maliciously avenging herself on Walter” and “flouting her own desperate fears” (Maugham, 2001, p. 88). The scene is

reproduced in all the three film adaptations of *The Painted Veil*. Resilience here is intertwined with a personal confrontation and defiance of common-sense rules; it ultimately leads to Kitty's survival in adverse circumstances and to her freedom "from the death which had threatened" (Maugham, 2001, p. 182).

Interestingly, resilience and resistance can be viewed on a more general level, as when Mother Superior of the French convent voices an opinion of different ethnic groups having a different degree of immunity: "These Chinese have no resistance" (Maugham, 2001, p. 115). In fact, in the context of cholera, an often-raised question concerns the correlation between the general standard of health of the population and individuals' resistance to this disease (Bourdelaïs, 1991, p. 126). Bourdelaïs notes that, although it is difficult to obtain definitive proof, malnutrition might aggravate the effects of cholera, especially in the situation of hunger and deprivation. Consequently, it can be inferred that the lower resistance of the Chinese, mentioned in the novel, might be true; however, instead of being presented as an innate feature, its reasons could be sought in a poorer quality of food available and lower standards of life as compared to the foreigners.

### **Scientific and Religious Perspectives**

Resilience can be seen both from a scientific and a religious/spiritual perspective. The resilience of the local population to the cholera epidemic in *The Painted Veil* is based on following traditions and invoking divine intervention, while the response of the Westerners is tied to their belief in science, rationalism and medical advances. The widely-acknowledged triumph of Western biomedicine and sanitation over such tropical diseases as cholera and considerable advances made in the West by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in water treatment, sanitation, vaccines and personal hygiene led to the fact that the majority of Westerners "regarded their impact on world disease complacently or even proudly", while Western medicine, which systematically discarded local traditional routines of healing, was used "to justify the expansion of Western imperial power and to illustrate the superiority of Western culture" (Hays, 2009, pp. 182, 187).

In the novel, local response to the disease includes reliance on religion: placing statues of gods in the streets, making offerings and sacrifices (Maugham, 2001, p. 82). In *The Painted Veil* (1934), there is a scene involving burning incense in front of the statues of gods; in the 2006 version, the locals perform rituals "to frighten off the spirit of death" (Curran, 2006, 00:39:35-38). These practices are either exoticized, like in the 1934 version, or largely dismissed by the Westerners as superstitions, as shown in the 2006 film. The emphasis in both the novel and the film adaptations is placed on the benefits brought by science and medical advances to the treatment of cholera, and Walter's contribution, as a trained M.D. and a bacteriologist, to the fight against the disease is generally depicted as a positive thing. The approach adopted by the Westerners is slightly vague in the novel and the earlier film adaptations: in the book, Walter's efforts are described evasively as "doctoring the sick", cleaning up the city and purifying the drinking water (Maugham, 2001, p. 92). In *The Painted Veil* (1934), the focus appears to be on military intervention and burning down the area of the town considered to be the epicenter of the epidemic. By the end of the film the epidemic situation improves (although it remains unclear due to which measures) as death rate is reported to go down by almost a quarter. *The Seventh Sin* (1957) places an emphasis on inoculation, following a heightened interest towards vaccines and their efficiency triggered in the American society by the massive testing of poliomyelitis vaccine in 1953, excessive media coverage following the successful outcome of trials in 1954 and the success of the

vaccination programme in 1955 (Hays, 2009, p. 271). *The Painted Veil* (2006) distinguishes itself from the previous adaptations and from the source text through providing a clearer idea of cholera, its symptoms and treatments based on Western advances in medical knowledge: the cholera victims receive intravenous saline solution, water samples are tested, and the microscope is recurrently shown in use. A methodical, rational and firm approach to cholera is clearly presented as superior to the local way of dealing with the epidemic. Thus, resilience in the face of the disease appears to be consistently shown as reliant rather on rational, scientific thinking than on local “superstitious” (*The Painted Veil* [2006]) and “chaotic” (*The Seventh Sin* [1957]) approaches.

### **Oriental and Occidental Responses**

Finally, resilience can be regarded from the point of view of Oriental vs. Occidental response to the epidemic. China’s being “a mark of absolute cultural alterity”, “irredeemably Other” to Western mentality (Holden, 1994, p. 64) expresses itself through the drastically different approaches to dealing with the disease and to resisting its menace. Modernity and rationality, according to Quijano (2000, p. 542), were considered as “exclusively European products and experiences”, and a “binary, dualist perspective on knowledge, particular to Eurocentrism, was imposed as globally hegemonic”, whereas such categories as magic/mythic-scientific, irrational-rational, traditional-modern defined the relations between Western Europe and the rest of the world. Although it needs to be acknowledged that numerous Westerners “held humanitarian convictions” and “faith in the efficacy of Western science and medicine to improve lives”, the resilience in face of the epidemic and a vigorous response of Western colonial powers to the diseases in the overseas territories were primarily motivated by a desire to protect their troops and administrators and to maintain the productivity of local workforce (Hays, 2009, p. 183).

In the novel, the response of the Orient to the epidemic appears to be rather passive; Mei-tan-fu acquires a metaphorical quality of “a city of the dead” (Maugham, 2001, p. 113) and transmits a Dantesque image of desolation and erring spirits. The “cowed and listless” citizens appear “intent on their own affairs”, void of feelings (Maugham, 2001, p. 96), wandering aimlessly in the littered streets of the town, with “an abstracted air so that you might almost have thought them ghosts” (Maugham, 2001, p. 113). This apathy demonstrates lower resilience to the effects of the mortal disease as compared to the Occidental energetic approach. In *The Painted Veil* there is an implicit trust in the determination and scientific advances of the West symbolized by Walter, in accordance with the statement that the relationship between the Occident and the Orient “on political, cultural, and even religious grounds, was seen [in the West] to be one between a strong and a weak partner” (Said, 1995, p. 40). The 1934 film exemplifies the significant role that cinema played in the “popularization of imperialist fantasies and ethnic stereotypes” (Berry, 2000, p. 119) by fitting a shy and awkward Walter into an image of a firm, knowledgeable and self-assured Westerner. As the situation in Mei-tan-fu is described as “chaos” since the death of the missionary doctor (Boleslawski, 1934, 00:50:10-13), this leads to the presumption that, without foreign help, the local government is unable to control the epidemic, which indirectly supports the idea of material and immaterial benefits spread by colonialism. In the 1957 film, Walter’s help (as a synecdoche for Western assistance) is initially politely declined by the elder of Mei-tan-fu, who claims that “they can manage as they always have” (Neame, 1957, 00:32:33-59). This resilience is connected to the belief in the tradition, but can also be attributed to a mistrust towards Western interference. The 2006 film represents Walter as a creative power, in contrast with the 1934 version; he is proactive, ingeniously looking for

solutions that his Western education and way of thinking suggest: he has an aqueduct elaborated and fresh drinking water supplied to the town, graves moved away from the river and prompt burials assured. Western resilience is thus based here upon a number of concrete measures, sometimes involving creativity and out-of-the-box thinking, that are taken in order to counter the disease.

## **Conclusion**

The close reading of Maugham's novel and its film adaptations in terms of their treatment of resilience in the face of an epidemic has shown the diverse angles from which this concept can be regarded. Through the analysis of the approaches towards the representation of resilience in *The Painted Veil*, it has transpired that these depend to a certain degree on the contemporary attitudes and beliefs in society and the contexts of production of the novel and the films. It has also become clear that the fight against cholera in *The Painted Veil* and its adaptations cannot be perceived separated from a wider historical, social, political and economic context, while numerous factors related to the discussion of resilience depend strongly on the colonial attitudes and imperialist ideology.

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